



# Case Study



## Complex Labeling

Labeling should be a simple conclusion to a production cycle, not a complex job that could delay shipment, believed Bob Moran, materials manager at Athena Controls.

Based in Plymouth Meeting, PA, near Philadelphia, Athena Controls designs and manufactures digital and analog temperature control instrumentation for applications in the process industries worldwide, ranging from plastics and packaging to food and pharmaceuticals. In addition to its standard products, Athena Controls modifies or custom-engineers controllers with options to satisfy special OEM requirements. Annual orders shipped from this 35-year-old company total \$10 million.

However, shipping to such a wide variety of customers requires a variety of labels, often for the same product. Athena Controls has 11 different product families and within each one there are numerous labeling requirements depending on the customer, its market, and the agencies that must approve the products. For example, some must



## Athena Controls Labeling | Athena controls complex labeling requirements made easy with new labeling method

show the UL® logo, others a CSA or a FM logo and still others a country logo. The electrical market may require the voltage and current on a label and companies like to have their name and phone number, as well as their own logo on the product. That requires a lot of graphics, like US flags, warning triangles, UL symbols, etc.

Specialized job hindered shipments  
“We had a full-time person that did nothing but receive customer orders and process all the labels needed to make shipments for those orders. It became a highly specialized function. If this person was out, we couldn’t make shipments. There were backups, but no one was as proficient,” says Moran. He wanted that changed. “It shouldn’t be a special position,” believed Moran.

While major manufacturers are using computerized labeling systems, cost and integration issues can be challenging to mid-sized companies.

The solution came when a label supplier told Moran about ScanLink, a total solutions provider who created ITSS (Inventory Software Solutions), a basic inventory software package for mid-sized companies.

“We took that program and created a customized package that integrates their existing production package configurator with LABEL MATRIX® 7.0 for Windows, barcode labeling and integration software from TEKLYNX International. ITSS analyzes the information from the configurator to make sure the proper information is



placed in the correct format for printing labels," says Ted Flick, president of ScanLink, based in Cinnaminson, NJ.

### Labeling Becomes Part of the Process

Before it took 48 hours to print labels or they had to be ordered ahead of time. "Now, at the end of production, the product comes off the line, the production associate pulls up the work order and enters the quantity of labels needed in the computer."

"What ScanLink did was to allow us to interpret the ordering codes of the different models, select all the label requirements, place them in the proper area on the label and print them," says Moran. Production associates first do a search by the internal sales order number in a Windows program listing all the line items. The associate selects the line item being processed and the quantity of labels they want, then the data is sent to a SATO CL412e thermal transfer printer from SATO America.

ScanLink recommends the SATO printer because of its graphic quality (300 dpi) and reliability. "SATO has always been the lead printer for me because of its quality. I usually don't have to send it back for a repair. My customers have very low maintenance issues with the product," says Flick. And despite the large amount of graphics, Athena Controls needs no extra print memory with the SATO CL412e.

It prints 16 individual peel-off labels on a 4 x 8.25 sheet and simultaneously assigns a serial number. Although a worker may only need to apply two of the 16 labels from each sheet, Athena Controls says the method is still much more cost effective than its old method. Then, the cost was 20 cents a label, now it is 13 cents, says Moran. "We might have as many as 67 nearly identical labels but with different logos. There's a cost if you have to carry that label inventory, pay artwork charges or order quantities of labels. We might have had to order 1,000 preprinted labels, but might only need 250. Now it doesn't matter. Everyone has their logo as a jpeg (digitized), they just send it and we can apply it anywhere they want it on the label," says Moran.

### Pluses for Warranty Tracking, Shipping Data, Employee Moral

The new labeling method also brought benefits for warranty tracking, shipping status clarification, and employee attitude. If someone calls in a year after the product was shipped with a warranty issue, workers readily verify it via the computer-maintained serial number. Older products need to be checked in a basement room filled with books from 35 years of manufacturing.

"With this database of purchase orders and serial numbers, we know right there when the customer calls if the product is within warranty. We've cut out a lot of non-value-added activities, lots of walking around and returning phone calls," says Moran.



"It's hard to put a dollar value on benefits like that," he says, but it is still a valuable benefit.

Similar benefits apply to shipping status knowledge. Thanks to the serial number tracking software, warranty and shipping information can be retrieved electronically by anyone with access to our network. Before the implementation of this system, this information retrieval required a trip to the manually maintained records located in our production area.

"We're also able to respond much quicker to customer orders. If a call comes in at 2 p.m., we don't have to worry about where our label person is. We just have to make sure the sales center enters the order into the system," says Moran.

### Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is another benefit. Being able to easily apply a customer's logo is winning points from the customers and the Athena Controls sales team. "It's been viewed as a tremendous selling tool. We can make the product look like it came from the customer. There are a few customers on the cusp of placing orders and this is one of the features that attracted them to our products," says Moran. "We would do that before, but it was always a cost that either we had to eat or pass on. Not anymore."

Workers surprised Moran with their positive reaction to moving the labeling process from an independent activity to the conclusion of the production process. "One benefit I didn't expect to see is that the whole production force is really involved in suggesting improvements. They have really embraced this label printing. From start to finish, they handle this product," says Moran. "Before, labeling wasn't part of the production flow. If they didn't get the labels on time, they felt everything they did was a waste. Now, if the product has to get to shipping by 3 p.m., they just push a button to print the labels and it gets there."

### SATO AMERICA CORPORATE

10350-A Nations Ford Rd  
Charlotte, NC 28273  
Phone: (704) 644-1650  
Fax: (704) 644-1662  
sales-sallc@sato-global.com

### LABEL MANUFACTURING, SERVICE & SALES

UNITED STATES MEXICO CENTRAL AMERICA  
CANADA CARIBBEAN